



3rd World Conference on Learning, Teaching and Educational Leadership ([WCLTA-2012](#))

## The essentials of the foreign language learning environment: Through the eyes of the pre-service EFL teachers

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### Abstract

The present study aims to identify pre-service EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers' perceptions in relation to various aspects of foreign language learning environments. 50 pre-service EFL teachers participated in the study. They were in the fourth year of their 4-year undergraduate teacher education program at an English Language Teaching department in Turkey. Data were collected by means of open-ended questionnaires and were analyzed qualitatively. 'Language teaching materials' and 'teaching techniques and methods' were the most frequently mentioned elements of the foreign language learning environment by pre-service EFL teachers. Findings were discussed in relation to pre-service language teacher education.

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Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Ferhan Odabaşı

**Keywords:** learning environment; pre-service teachers; foreign language teacher education.

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### 1. Introduction

Learners' and teachers' perceptions of the learning environment have become the concern of policy makers and practitioners. Many researchers in their studies also support those educational stakeholders' sensitivity in the sense that teachers' and learners' perception toward the learning environment (LE) influence the way they actually learn and they teach. (Anderson, Hamilton, & Hattie, 2004; Fraser, 1998; Fraser, & Walberg, 2005; Freiberg, 1998; Baeten, Dochy, & Struyven, 2012). Sharing such a sensitivity of those educational partners, it would be an invaluable responsibility not only to learn perceptions of learners in relation to the learning environment but also of in-service and pre-service teachers. However, although one can find tremendous findings about learners' and teachers' perceptions in relation to the various elements of the learning environment (Chua et al., 2011; John et al., 2003; Zedan, 2010), there exists relatively scarce research on pre-service teachers' perceptions on the learning environment in both European literature (Dorman, 2008) and Turkish educational literature. In foreign/second language teacher education literature, there seems to be the same gap as to the various elements of the foreign language learning environment as perceived by pre-service teachers.

A study of the foreign language learning environment entails a clear definition of what the learning environment is and what it consists of. In what follows, answers are sought to those questions both at conceptual and operational levels.

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## 2. What is learning environment?

One of the earliest definitions of the learning environment has been put forward by Schmuck and Schmuck (1978). They portray the learning environment as what takes place all throughout teacher-student and student-student interaction and draw attention to such elements of the learning environment as interpersonal relationships, emotional and structural aspects of teaching style and classroom organization, teacher expectations of students and attitudes towards them, level of teacher control, disciplinary problems, the gender and age of the students. Entwistle and Tait (1995) describes the learning environment as a whole learning situation related to a course, including lectures, assignments, tests and a variety of learning resources. In another definition, Entwistle et al. (2003) have referred to the same concept in a wider sense to include several other aspects of the learning environment such as course design and organization, staff-student relationships and student cultures. Some of the other conceptualizations of the learning environment emphasize the quality of the learning environment. As an example, Byrne, Hattie and Fraser (1986) describe the ideal learning environment as the one where maximum learning and achievement take place in. Zedan (2010) makes similar claims and describes the desirable learning environment as being 'supportive, egalitarian, democratic and organized according to pre-determined rules and regulations' (p. 76). Pointing to the relation between the construction of behavior and teaching environment, Miller, Ferguson, and Byrne (2000) specified the definition of LE in relation to difficult classroom behavior and suggested that the classroom regime-be it strict or not-and fair actions of teachers were the important elements of the learning environment influencing learning behavior. Thus, in light of all those conceptualizations of the learning environment, it can be said that the learning environment is a broad and multi-layered phenomenon involving socio-psychological, socio-cultural, pedagogical and physical domains.

## 3. Purpose and significance of the study

As mentioned earlier, although there is voluminous literature on teachers' and students' perceptions of different aspects of the learning environment (Chua et al., 2011; John et al., 2003; Zedan, 2010), the same issue has attracted little attention in pre-service teacher education and even less in foreign language teacher education. The present study thus aims to identify pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions in relation to various aspects of foreign language learning environments. A study on pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of the foreign language learning environment can provide us, teacher educators, with valuable feedback about pre-service EFL teachers' awareness and knowledge of the various aspects of the foreign language learning environment. Armed with that feedback, we can offer suggestions for implementing an intervention to develop student teachers' understanding of the foreign language learning environment and can thus lead to improvements in their future classroom learning environments.

The following research question has guided the study:

What are the elements of the foreign language learning environment as perceived by pre-service EFL teachers?

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Participants

The research question was addressed using a sample of 50 pre-service EFL teachers who were in the fourth year of their 4-year undergraduate teacher education program at one of the universities in Turkey. A request for participation was made to 100 pre-service EFL teachers having their practicum in varied secondary schools appointed by Local Ministry of Education. The request was responded by some of the pre-service EFL teachers in each school (a total of 16 schools). When the data collection started, participants had just completed all of their courses at their departments required by the Board of Higher Education. Some of the professional courses that they studied were: Approaches in ELT I and II, Methodology I and II, Teaching English to Young Learners; Teaching Language Skills, School Experience I and Practice Teaching.

#### 4. 2. Data collection

In order to collect data, an open-ended questionnaire was utilized and administered to participants immediately after they had completed all of their courses at the ELT department. The questionnaire was administered in Turkish and asked participants to state their ideas about what constituted the elements of the foreign language learning environment.

#### 4. 3. Data analysis

The collected written views of the participants in relation to the various elements of the foreign language learning environment were based on their individual observations and understandings earned in their theoretical and teaching practice classes. All these written accounts were analyzed using ‘categorical-content method’ (Lieblich et al. 1998). In other words, it was broken down, conceptualized and put back together in new ways, by being repeatedly sorted, coded and compared conceptually. Firstly, an initial coding was carried out after a close examination of the data, resulting in a total of 26 sub-categories. Secondly, these sub-categories were grouped into overarching categories as mentioned in detail below. Lastly, a frequency count was also held to reveal how many of the participants mentioned a particular sub-category.

### 5. Findings

The first stage of data analysis resulted in a diverse range of sub-themes in relation to pre-service EFL teachers’ perceptions of the foreign language learning environment. In the second round of analysis, these sub-themes were grouped into seven different overarching categories as follows: ‘physical aspects’, ‘socio-psychological aspects’, ‘instructional approaches and methods’, ‘learner involvement’, ‘parental support’, ‘linguistic aspect’, and ‘others’ (See Table 1). The major category ‘physical aspects’ accounted for the physical conditions of the classroom (i.e. general layout of the classroom-desks, seating arrangement; class size, etc.) and the adequacy of language teaching materials. The ‘social-psychological aspects’ of the classroom were related to the socio-psychological dynamics of the classroom and included such issues as positive classroom atmosphere, relationships between the teacher and the learners, teacher and learner attitudes, and so on. ‘Instructional approaches and methods’ was created as another major category to encompass issues such as lesson content, the teacher’s teaching philosophy, teaching methods and teaching techniques. Learning itself, learners’ motivation and readiness for learning foreign languages identified by participants as the elements of the foreign language learning environment made up one more general category ‘learner involvement’. Parental attitudes and support were labeled as ‘Parental support’ and the issues regarding the nature of linguistic input provided in the foreign language classroom as ‘linguistic aspects’. For the sub-themes that could not be assigned to any of the above-mentioned major themes, the category ‘others’ was created.

In the third cycle of analysis, a frequency count was held to show how many of the participants mentioned a particular sub-category. ‘Language teaching materials’ was by far the largest sub-category, with most of the responses falling into this category (38 of the participants mentioned it as one of the key elements of the foreign language learning environment). This was immediately followed by ‘instructional approaches and methods’ (n=35). The other sub-categories were as follows in descending order: ‘learner attitudes and feelings’, ‘teacher attitudes and feelings’, ‘physical environment of the classroom’, ‘instructional approaches’, ‘lesson content and delivery’, ‘others’, ‘positive classroom atmosphere’, ‘learner motivation’, ‘learners’ readiness’, ‘student learning’, ‘rapport’, ‘parental support’, ‘linguistic aspects’, ‘collaboration’, and ‘learner-centeredness’.

Table1. Elements of the foreign language learning environment as perceived by pre-service EFL teachers

	N=50
<b>ELEMENTS OF THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT</b>	<i>N</i>
<b>PHYSICAL ASPECTS</b>	
Physical environment of the classroom	11
Language teaching materials	38
<b>SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS</b>	
Positive classroom atmosphere	9
Collaboration	2
Rapport	4
Learner-centeredness	2
Learner attitudes & feelings	13
Teacher attitudes & feelings	12
<b>INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES &amp; METHODS</b>	
Instructional approaches	11
Lesson content & delivery	11
Instructional methods & techniques	35
<b>LEARNER INVOLVEMENT</b>	
Learners' readiness	6
Student learning	5
Motivation	9
<b>PARENTAL SUPPORT</b>	4
<b>LINGUISTIC ASPECTS</b>	4
<b>OTHERS</b> (Teachers' physical features, cooperation between school administration and teachers, learners, teacher knowledge, qualified teachers, learners' aptitude, learners' previous learning experiences, stimuli in the learning environment, learners' physical features, rewards)	11

## 6. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to unravel pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions in relation to the various elements of the foreign language learning environment. It seemed that pre-service EFL teachers in the present study construed the foreign language classroom as a multi-dimensional setting consisting of a set of physical, socio-psychological, pedagogical and linguistic elements. This finding is seemingly promising since the pre-service EFL teachers are able to identify the major elements of those contexts on a broader level. However, it was surprising to find that 'language teaching materials' were predominantly mentioned by participants as one of the key elements of the foreign language learning environment. The prevalency of 'language teaching materials' in participants' accounts might be due to the existing physical conditions of the learning environments in the context of the present study where lack of materials and equipment still remains a huge concern in the education system. There is great likelihood that this lackness constitutes a major frame of reference in pre-service EFL teachers' constructs when the foreign language learning environment is concerned. 'Instructional methods and techniques' was the other element of the foreign language learning environment most frequently brought up by participants. This finding could be

explained on the basis of pre-service EFL teachers' conceptions of foreign language learning and teaching on a broader level and might point to a rather teacher-centred view of the foreign language learning environment. Relatively less emphasis on learner involvement as one of the elements of the foreign language learning environment might be an indication of such a view. Unlike 'language teaching materials' and 'instructional methods and techniques', linguistic elements of the foreign language environment (i.e. use of classroom language, exposure to the target language, classroom interaction) were little emphasized in participants' accounts although those elements lie at the very heart of the foreign language classroom. Similarly, 'parental support' was an underemphasized issue in participant responses.

## 7. Conclusion

The present study was in pursuit of understanding pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of the elements of the foreign language learning classrooms. Data were gathered by means of open-ended questionnaires and were analyzed using content-categorical method (Lieblich et al., 1998). One of the major findings of the present study was the overemphasis in data on the physical and instructional aspects of the foreign language learning environment (Language teaching materials' and 'instructional methods and techniques' were by far the most frequently mentioned elements) when compared to the socio-psychological and learner-related aspects. These findings seem to call for a need to develop pre-service EFL teachers' understanding of the different aspects of the foreign language learning environments. Such an understanding could be enhanced by awareness-raising activities in which pre-service EFL teachers will be continuously encouraged to reflect on such vital questions as what constitutes a foreign language classroom and how a successful learning environment can be created. These attempts, in turn, might lead to improvements in pre-service EFL teachers' future classroom learning environments.

This study seems to be the first research undertaking which has attempted to reveal pre-service EFL teachers' conceptualizations of the various elements of the foreign language learning environment. It is hoped that the information gleaned from this study would contribute to future inquiries in the field of language teacher education in unique ways.

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